

## CORRESPONDENCE.

## The Fauna of Muskeget Island—A Reply.

EDITORS OF 'THE AUK':—

*Dear Sirs:*—I take it for granted that I shall be allowed, with your accustomed courtesy, a little space in your Journal for the purpose of replying to the author of a letter entitled, 'The Fauna of Muskeget Island—A Protest,' which appeared in the number for January, 1898. This letter, I am free to confess, has given me a genuine surprise. It is only after some hesitation that I have decided to reply to it. I can but regard this 'Protest,' with its accompanying inferences, as uncalled for by the facts in the case. I therefore beg your indulgence to take up some of the points in the order that they are presented in Mr. Miller's letter.

I have shot but one Short-eared Owl for a number of years. I have had, however, in the Legislature for two years past, and again this winter, a bill in which there is a clause giving this Owl full protection. The above mentioned bird is now in Mr. William Brewster's collection, and is in the dark phase of plumage. It was one of a brood hatched on Muskeget during the summer of 1896. I would have shot the entire family had I been able to accomplish it *at the time*, for the reason that I had the interests of the Terns in view; hence all antagonistic elements, whether developed in man, mammals, or birds, were regarded as enemies and so treated. Bird protection is a complicated and difficult problem at best. I see no occasion for making it harder for those engaged in it. When a gentleman of Mr. Miller's ornithological knowledge expresses such sentiments in print as the following: "But when bird protection results in the destruction of a family of Owls, which, notwithstanding its numerical insignificance, far outweighs in biological interest the largest Tern colony on the entire Atlantic coast," I think that lovers of bird life have a right to 'protest' with more reason than he. When bird protection embraces a remnant of Terns raised from a low ebb through years of tireless protection, as it does in the present case, to colonies, the numbers of which are beyond estimate, I am of the opinion that such a condition outweighs any problematical biological interest likely to arise from Muskeget Island ever becoming a habitat of Short-eared Owls. Mr. Miller states that the vertebrate fauna of Muskeget may be roughly divided into two groups, viz., normal and abnormal. In the latter class he places the Short-eared Owl. From an ornithological standpoint this is surprising, for as far as I know it has no foundation in fact. I was not aware that Muskeget Island had *ever* produced any form of the Short-eared Owl that is different from what is found elsewhere; neither is there much likelihood of such a race occurring in the future on Muskeget. The conditions

of environment, as they at present exist, are against such abnormal development. If, during the past, no such *recognizable* pale race has been produced by the conditions as claimed and presented, what ground or promise is there of *now* establishing such a race amidst a shooting club, a life saving station, and fishermen who have numbers of cats to hold in check the vermin. These vermin are the direct result of those reintroduced on the island by Mr. Miller and associates several years ago.

I fail to appreciate and dissent from the statement near the foot of page 77 that, "by helping to offer direct historical proof of the rapidity at which modification may progress under natural conditions the Terns would be fulfilling a more important end than in gladdening the eye of the visitor to Muskeget, and the heart of the reader of Mr. Mackay's progress report." These beautiful birds are fulfilling at the present time a much more important end than the one suggested, by delighting the eye of every lover of bird life to whom the privilege of enjoying their companionship is given. Refining in their influences, what higher or better end can they serve?

GEORGE H. MACKAY.

*Boston, January 17, 1898.*

#### The Short-eared Owls of Muskeget Island.

EDITORS OF 'THE AUK':—

*Dear Sirs:*—I quite agree with Mr. Miller (*cf.* Auk, XV, No. 1, January, 1898, pp. 75-77) that the killing of the family of Muskeget Owls in 1896, merely because they were preying on the Terns, was ill-judged. If Muskeget were my private property I should encourage and protect the Owls, and they would be made welcome to as many Terns as they chose to eat, for I should feel confident that however fast they might increase the Terns would outstrip them in the race. As Mr. Miller says, bird protection should not be made one sided for if it be so it is certain to lose not only its scientific but much of its aesthetic value, as well as something, even, of its practical usefulness. Bird protectors, whether they be sportsmen or pure bird lovers, would do well to study more closely the balance of nature, for it concerns the success of their enterprises far more closely than they seem to realize. Even the naturalists do not as yet fully understand the complex workings and delicate adjustments of a system which, when not interfered with by man, seems invariably to result in the production and maintenance of the richest possible fauna, of which the predatory and non-predatory forms increase together to the full limits of the capacity for food and shelter which the country furnishes. No one who has ever visited a primitive region, well timbered, well watered and not too cold, can deny the truth of this, but it is certainly difficult to understand or explain how Hawks, Owls, Herons,